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Eric Singer

Prelude to a **KISS**

SPECIAL!
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Transcription
"The Muscian"

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The Pocket is the Pocket

New Products from

Melodics and SE Microphones

Sheridan Riley

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Stickman

Drumming and
Music Inspired Art

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Eric Singer

Prelude to a **KISS**

By Mark Griffith



Why would the title of an interview with KISS's Eric Singer draw a title from a classic *Duke Ellington* composition? Well, I'll let Eric explain that, "I have music playing 24/7 in the house, it's usually the Sinatra station on SiriusXM. Today, I like to listen to music that that's the antithesis of what I do."

In this interview Eric and I talk about his entire career before Kiss, the "prelude" (if you will,) and his 26 years in KISS. You'll see how being asked to appear in a 1984 *Women in Rock* video and an Olivia Newton-John video for "Culture Shock" in 1985 started his career and led directly to Eric joining KISS in 1991. Eric details how to make a name for yourself, survive in the music business, and have a long career playing drums for the most popular artists of all time. But it isn't just KISS... Lita Ford, Black Sabbath, Gary Moore, Brian May, Queen, Alice Cooper, Paul Stanley, Badlands, Ronnie Montrose, and KISS have all called Eric's number to record and tour, and it all started with an important mid-western upbringing right outside of Cleveland, in Euclid, Ohio.

MD: I've said it many times, but in this business, longevity is the biggest achievement that we can attain. Longevity means you can play well, people like being around you, and you have got all your stuff together. All of that is wrapped up in one word, professionalism. And amazingly, that professionalism was displayed to me yesterday when, one day before our interview, you called me just to confirm that everything was still going as scheduled, and to make sure there were no mix-ups. That's professionalism!

ES: Musicians can be flaky, but you don't have to be flaky. In fact, if you want a long career, you can't be flaky. Gene Simmons always told me, "Eric you're the consummate pro." That means a lot, and it was because of my upbringing. I have to give credit to both my father and my mother. My mother and father were like yin and yang. Every scenario that could happen in life, whether it was musically or otherwise, could be covered by either of their personalities. My father had a very big ego and was a strict disciplinarian about everything. My mother had a softer side with compassion and generosity. I always felt like an even blend of both my parent's personalities.

I grew up in Euclid, OH and I'm glad I was raised there. I grew up on the East side of the city, but in the summer of '69 we moved to a different part of town with a different school district. It was only 54 blocks away, but suddenly, I was going to a different elementary school and the kids were different. All the kids were hippie kids, they were into rock 'n roll and it was just a different vibe. I remember they all liked Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and Deep Purple.

Ohio is the heartland of America, and a lot of bands had their strongest base in that part of the country. A lot of times you don't realize things until you're older, but I have really started to realize how impactful that whole environment was to me. We had WMMS on the radio which was one of the most influential radio stations in the country. Bands like Rush, Meat Loaf, and Bruce Springsteen broke in America because WMMS and the Cleveland DJ's started playing them. Growing up there, I had a lot of great experiences going to see concerts.

I met a kid named Jim Ellis who influenced me a lot. He had a cool Fender Precision Bass and a blue sparkle Kustom amp. Jim was into a lot of cool music, he's the guy that introduced me to the MC5 and Iggy Pop. He bought me Iggy's *Raw Power* and Paul McCartney's first solo album for my 12th birthday. He introduced me to bands like Nazareth and Golden Earring, and when punk started happening, he was into the underground punk scene. Jim told me to check out Television, Talking Heads, and The Dead Boys (out of Cleveland.) Jim and I saw Pere Ubu, and the band that opened for them was Devo. I remember seeing Devo and the Rubber City Rebels. Jim Ellis really exposed me to music that I probably wouldn't have discovered on my own. I wasn't really into the punk thing, but I was open minded to a lot of music. While I was listening to all of that, my older sister Monique introduced me to the first Chicago album, The Temptations, The Supremes, and all the Motown stuff. That whole environment really contributed to what I ended up doing and what I do. Today, most of the music I listen to is 50s and 60s jazz.

The Cleveland area was a great breeding ground for drummers. I grew up with Michael Cartellone from Lynyrd Skynyrd, Jimmy Clark is a great drummer from the Cleveland

area who played with Joan Jett and Deborah Harry. Now he's Lars Ulrich's drum tech. Louie Bellson got a friend of mine named Ray Porello the gig with Count Basie. Ray's dad played drums, and so did his two sons. Louie would have Ray sit in and eventually Basie offered him the gig. But then he got in a car accident and ruptured his spleen. Butch Miles took his place, and he never got the gig back. Then Ray got the gig with Sammy Davis Jr. and he did that for a long time, Ray's younger brother Rick took his place with Sammy when Rick was only about 19. I really looked up to all of these guys because they were great local drummers.

MD: There are drummers like that in every region. They haven't achieved drumming "fame" for whatever reason, but they inspired an entire generation of drummers.

ES: I'll give you another one. Kevin Valentine was the drummer in Donnie Iris' band. Kevin was two years older than me. In high

Gene Simmons always told me, "Eric you're the consummate pro." That means a lot, and it was because of my upbringing.

school I remember watching his band practice through their basement window. He got into the band Breathless who opened for KISS in 1978 on the *Destroyer Tour*. Kevin was the local kid from my neighborhood that had made it already. I used to go watch him play at the clubs, he was a great drummer that always played like a seasoned pro even when he was young. He played just the right way and he had just the right feel. When I moved to LA and became (kind of) established in the LA scene, Kevin moved out there too. I recommended him to Cinderella when they switched drummers. After I met Paul Stanley and was doing demos with KISS (I wasn't in KISS yet,) I recommend Kevin to Paul and Gene, he started doing demos and did the *Psycho Circus* album in '98. It felt great to help a guy that I looked up to and who influenced me as a kid.

Like you said, those local guys have a big impact on you, and you don't realize how much of an influence they had until you get a little older and look back. They set the bar and led the way. Sure, you must have long-term goals, but those local guys showed you the short-term goals, and that those goals were achievable, which is just as important.

MD: Your dad was a local musician too.

ES: My dad was a band leader, my mother sang and played violin. Of course, I saw The Beatles and The Stones on Ed Sullivan, but I really loved the Dave Clark Five because the drummer was the leader, and the band was named after him, and he had that cool red sparkle Rogers kit.

My first kit was a blue sparkle Dixie set, (which was actually Pearl before they became Pearl.) But my dad bought me a Rogers kit in 1972 for my 14th birthday. It was silver sparkle with two mounted toms on and a 24" bass drum. I wanted that kit because it reminded me of the Dave Clark Five. Although I was a very tiny kid, I wanted that big 24 because almost every other kit in the store was a 22 or a 20.

I started playing in my father's society band when I was 14, we played at the local Hofbrau house, Oktoberfest, everywhere! We played every kind of music: Ethnic (Hungarian) music, show tunes, the American songbook like Cole Porter and Gershwin. When you play all these different kinds of music it can be very helpful. You have a familiarity with different styles in your drumming arsenal and you can draw on those styles to create drum parts in bands. When you are playing in a band that is writing music, you might think, "I'm gonna play a snare roll or marching cadence, or some sort of ethnic beat in this section. You can do that because you learned to play different kinds of music, and you are finding a way to apply that vocabulary. I used to get frustrated because my dad would be tough on me. He had a very strong personality, a big ego, and had a disciplinary taskmaster kind of mentality. I would voice my frustration with him and the other guys in the band would tell me to just listen and pay attention. I didn't know it then, but I know it now. My dad was teaching me how to deal with big personalities and big egos. That has really helped me in my career. I was hypersensitive when I was younger, my dad would yell, "You're not playing it right!" Sometimes he would kick me off the drums and he'd play. He could play drums a little, he didn't have any kind of chops, but he could play. He knew how to play the right beat with the right feel, and that's what he was trying to teach me. He always took me to see all the big bands like Louie Belson, Buddy Rich, Maynard Ferguson, the Air Force big band, and Basie.

From that point on, and for the next 10 years, I was always working in bands on weekends. I got to see a lot of great concerts, but there was a lot of concerts that I missed because I was working in bands. All through high school, when my friends were hanging out and partying on the weekends, I was playing in bands. I didn't always like playing in my dad's band, but it gave me the structure and discipline that I needed to learn. I learned how to be in a band, how to be a good band member, and how to work for people. My father didn't take crap from anyone, and he ran a tight ship.

We all start by picking up a pair of sticks, but we all go on our own paths. We may find some common ground with a lot of other people along the way, and that common ground

is what you try to impart and share with people through sharing experiences. We're all gonna have our own individual takes on that journey, but at least by giving people your point of view, others can learn. You can learn from good drummers and bad drummers, you can learn what to, and what not to do, as long as you keep your eyes and ears open. You must be open minded and receptive to that. You can try to mimic and imitate someone to a certain degree, but you're never going to be that guy. Even if you become technically more advanced than that guy, you're not going to be him.



The only way to get good at something is by doing it. You can practice a lot but learning the application of what you've been practicing is how you get better. That's when you move up to a higher level. You can only be great in your basement for so long. A lot of guys are great in their basements, but as soon as you throw them into the real world of playing and traveling in different environments, that's when you find out if you can do it. It's not about just being able to play at home and being really good, it's about dealing with the routine of traveling and playing when you're sick or rundown. We just finished this last KISS tour, and I started touring with Lita Ford in 1984; that means I've been touring for 39 years, and (so far) I've NEVER missed a gig. That includes instances when I've been as sick as a dog with every kind of flu imaginable.

MD: I have played some gigs while I was really sick too, and we always play very well when we're sick. Why do you think that is?

ES: Yeah, they are always great nights until we get back to the hotel and collapse. I think it's partly adrenaline. But once you've learned to play, and you get experience playing a lot of gigs, I don't want to say it's "cruise control" because that isn't it. But you learn how to be make drumming an involuntary muscle like breathing or your heartbeat. Involuntary muscles move whether you think about them or not, and when you start overthinking stuff you can actually make things more complicated than they need to be. But the only way you learn to develop that sixth sense is to just play naturally and not overthink things. I've been on stage playing and suddenly I'm in "auto mode." I definitely don't mean this in a negative way, but I'll literally be playing and think, "I gotta make sure I call and pay my credit card," or "I gotta call mom," or *whatever*... When that happens, you don't get lost because the drumming and the music is so ingrained in you. You're so confident, comfortable, and experienced in all these different environments, that everything is almost "automatic," and you can do it without thought.

The key is being able to deal with adversity, that could be illness or whatever. I've lost three family members while I've been on tour. You learn to compartmentalize things in your life. You can't fall apart even though you want to mourn and be able to grieve. It's not about being insensitive or being impervious to your emotions, it's about realizing that there's a time and a place, and you just can't stop everything because something happens. You know you have to go through it, and at the appropriate time you can address your own personal emotions. It's not about making yourself insensitive or robotic, it's just a necessary survival tactic.

MD: Vinnie Colaiuta told me in an interview once that, "Thought is the enemy of flow."

ES: That's it! Vinnie Colaiuta is my favorite all around drummer. Vinnie can play any kind of music, and he plays everything very authentically. His vocabulary is amazing. I use the word vocabulary instead of chops. Vinnie can speak a lot of languages on the drums, and he speaks all the complicated languages that exist and even the ones that are almost extinct.

MD: What music are you listening to, and what music has meant the most to you throughout your life?

ES: Of course, I like all the fusion stuff. As I get older, I can really

look back to my youth and identify which drummers really influenced me. Of course, I love Buddy Rich and Louie Bellson, but I always wanted to play rock. I remember seeing The Beatles and the Stones and all the bands on Ed Sullivan, but I was only six in 1964. I really started understanding and comprehending what drummers in bands were doing around 1973. By that time, I had been playing drums for five or six years, and when I saw a drummer in concert, I knew what he was doing. Maybe I couldn't do certain things on the technical level, but I knew what they were doing.

My early inspirations were guys like Cozy Powell on Jeff Beck Group's *Rough and Ready*. Those two Jeff Beck records were a little funkier. Even though Cozy didn't have crazy chops he had the right feeling, approach, and style for that music. Carmine Appice has always been one of my favorite drummers because Carmine always got a great sound and feel. When he was with Rod Stewart, listen to "Hot Legs" and all that stuff. Beck, Bogert, & Appice (BBA) was great drumming too. Denny Carmassi was amazing on the Montrose records. That's the timeline of music from when I was around 16 years old. Obviously, there's John Bonham, I love Deep Purple and Ian Paice, especially on *Machine Head*, and Humble Pie's Jerry Shirley. I like hard rock drummers that have an English feel and style. I always thought Carmine

When you play all these different kinds of music it can be very helpful. You have a familiarity with different styles in your drumming arsenal and you can draw on those styles to create drum parts in bands.

and Denny had that English feel. I tell all my drummer friends if you want to listen to great rock drumming with a slightly progressive sense, Prairie Prince's drumming on that first Tubes album is amazing. I discovered Simon Phillips on that *801 Live* record, Michael Schenker's first record, and Jeff Beck's *There and Back*, but he was also on Judas Priest's *Sin After Sin*. I was buying everything that Simon did around that time, I love his drumming.

MD: And both you and Simon both grew up playing in your father's jazz groups.

ES: I thought Simon sounded like a rock drummer that played in a fusion-y way. The stuff he plays is not jazzy and over your head for a rock context, he stayed more linear. He has serious rock chops, but he plays busier. He played a lot of cool stuff, but he still had a rock vocabulary. I loved Tommy Aldridge with Pat Travers, Mark Craney on Gino Vanelli's *Brother to Brother*, Terry Bozzio on the Brecker Brothers' *Heavy Metal Bebop* and with Missing Persons. I love Steve Smith's playing in Journey, but also with Montrose and Jean-Luc Ponty. Dennis Chambers can play anything. However, the guy that never got enough attention is Marvin "Smitty" Smith. He's amazing and really played a lot of great music. Watch some of the videos of Marvin in his early

years. He never got the accolades like Weckl, Gadd, Vinnie, and Dennis, but "Smitty" can play at that level. Again, he has that multiple vocabulary, and plays a lot of styles.

I'm obviously not that kind of drummer, I'm a rock drummer, it's great to be a chameleon, that's an amazing skill and attribute, but there's also nothing wrong with wanting to be a rock drummer that plays with bands. I loved KISS "the band," *Dressed to Kill* was my favorite record. Even though Peter Criss was never a direct drumming influence on me, KISS as a whole was *most definitely* a major influence as "a band." That's what I aspired to, that's how I looked at myself, I wanted to play the music that those bands played.

interaction.

MD: Most drummers know you as the longtime drummer in KISS. But there was a lot before that, how did this whole journey start?

ES: When I first moved to LA I was laser focused, I intended to sign up at PIT (Percussion Institute of Technology) and I met with Joe Porcaro. I decided to wait until the next semester to sign up, in the meantime I saw that Casey Scheuerell was giving lessons. I had just seen him on TV with Jean-Luc Ponty and remembered



Today I listen to 90% jazz: Art Blakey, Jimmy Cobb, and Philly Joe Jones. I like anything Miles Davis has done. He played with a beautiful pure tone. He was the most influential musical pioneer (jazz and rock-jazz fusion) ever. Look at all those fusion bands that came from Miles. Those fusion guys like Tony Williams, Lenny White, Billy Cobham, and Alphonse Mouzon were rock stars when I was a kid. One of my most influential albums is Billy Cobham's *Spectrum*, that's what got me away from some of the more basic rock drumming. Billy Cobham and Lenny White are two of my favorites, but as I've gotten older, I really think Lenny is the perfect blend of everything that I like in jazz and rock fusion drumming. I love him on his record *Venusian Summer* and on Return to Forever's *Romantic Warrior*. I recently saw him with (bassist) Buster Williams a few years ago at a small theater in downtown LA on Washington Blvd. I made sure I got there early so my seat was about eight feet from him. He was set up sideways, so I was looking at him from the side, I got to really watch him. That's how I love to watch a drummer, I want to see drummers from that open side so I can watch the foot-hand interaction and see the technique and the dynamic of that

that he sounded great, so I called him up and started taking lessons from him. He was really cool; I had already taken lessons from a guy in Cleveland who was teaching me the Alan Dawson stuff and using Ted Reed's *Syncopation*. Casey had me do some different exercises and encouraged me to be inventive and try my own things with that book. Instead of playing figures with the left-hand, I started playing time on top and doing all the figures with my feet, because I was heavy into double bass at that time. After a while I asked Casey (who now teaches at Berklee) about going to PIT. He said, "I think I know what kind of drummer you wanna be, my advice to you is you to keep taking lessons privately from different people, because if you go to PIT you're going to have to spend so much time on that curriculum, which is great and you'll learn so much, but you'll have no time to play in a band, and I think that's where you're at. You should take lessons, get different points of view from people, but you should start playing in a band. I just think you're at a point where you should just get out and play." He actually convinced me *NOT* to go to PIT, and he was a teacher there. He was doing the right thing. That was good advice *for me* based on where I was at in

my 25-year-old life. In the four or five months that I took lessons from Casey, he was not only a big influence, but he taught me to follow my instincts and have confidence in myself. Confidence can be instilled by what you do, but sometimes other people can instill it in you, and you should always listen to somebody who is already doing what you want to do. Casey was from that whole group of drummers like John "JR" Robinson, Vinnie Colaiuta, and Steve Smith. Those guys were all were at Berklee at the same time. That era produced some serious drummers that are some of the most influential drummers of our generation.

They say that luck is when opportunity meets preparedness. When an opportunity presents itself, you must be prepared enough to take advantage of that opportunity, and that's what I did. Sometimes you're just not ready, but when I auditioned for things, I was always very prepared. When I really knew the material and felt confident, I had a much better chance than just going in cold and not knowing the situation and the material. You shouldn't audition for something if you don't know the material and you're not prepared. It's not about showing a band that you can *play*. It's about showing people that you can play *their* songs. I always took the time and respect to learn a band's material and played it like it was on the record, unless they told me otherwise. A band would always hear that I did my homework and was playing things verbatim. Later, they might say, "We do it a little bit different live, or we do this section a little bit different, so you can take some liberties there."

My first audition came because someone saw me at a Carmine Appice Drum Off contest, I must give credit to Carmine. I didn't win, I took third place, but Brenda Lee Holiday called Carmine and got my number and asked me to be in a Playboy video called *The Women of Rock*. The guy that played bass in the video owned a rehearsal studio where Lita Ford and Black Sabbath rehearsed. Randy Castillo had been the drummer with Lita, but he was going to quit, and that bassist told me that I'd be good for Lita's gig. He told her about me and let me bring my kit to one of his rehearsal rooms for two weeks to practice and learn her album *Dancing on the Edge*. I learned that whole album verbatim. Randy Castillo was the drummer on that and there was a lot of good drum parts. She did a cattle call audition of about 10 drummers. When I played, the first thing she said was, "When I close my eyes it's like Randy's not even gone." I'll never forget that. I learned that record note for note, so when we played it was exactly like the record. I made sure that I gave it a good shot, and it paid off. That's what started me on my journey. I always have to give props to Lita Ford; she gave me my first break.

Lita was dating Tony Iommi at the time, and he was producing some of Lita's demos and was working on new material for an album. She told me that Tony wanted me to play drums on some of his demos. It was kind of surreal, the next thing you know I'm in the studio playing on the Black Sabbath album *Seventh Star*. That was the first time I ever played on a record, and I have to admit I was not that experienced. But because I had put a lot of work in, and I was so laser focused it helped launch my career.

MD: After the Black Sabbath record, how did your career progress from gig to gig?

ES: The Sabbath thing was a great experience. When I first got the gig, the tour got postponed a couple weeks, so instead of starting in Chicago the first gig was in Cleveland. My first big gig coming back to Cleveland was playing in Black Sabbath. When I left, I was a kid working at King's making trumpets and saxophones, I literally reinvented myself and I came back two and a half years later in Black Sabbath. I looked completely different, I was a different drummer, and I was a different person. I'm still the same guy, I've always tried to keep my attitude and my ego in check, that's very important, but it was very surreal. After that first Sabbath record, they switched singers from Ray Gillen (Ray and I ended up in Badlands together,) but that situation didn't work out. Tony Iommi brought in Bob Daisley to play bass, but Bob didn't like the new management. Bob called me up to tell me that he was going to play with Gary Moore, and

The only way to get good at something is by doing it. You can practice a lot but learning the application of what you've been practicing is how you get better.

that he had told Gary about me. Bob told me that he thought this would be really good for my career and give me some credibility on my resume' because everybody knew how great all of Gary's drummers were.

MD: Gary always had great drummers in his bands. Tommy Aldridge, Ian Paice, Bobby Chouinard...

ES: Actually, Bobby did the tour after he replaced Ian Paice on the record. I thought it was very cool that Ian Paice was so humble to talk about that situation. No matter how good you are, and Ian's a true legend, sometimes you're not the right fit, not playing great, or just not right for the situation. Ian got replaced on the album, and Gary brought in Bobby Chouinard, and he did the tours opening for Rush and Queen. But that was very brave of Ian to talk about that. Everybody has been fired at some point in their career.

I flew over to London without telling anybody because I was still in Black Sabbath. I did an audition, and the callback and I got Gary's gig. We went on tour for the *Wild Frontier* album and did a live concert video called *Live from Stockholm*. I met Jake E. Lee on that tour because he came to one of the Gary Moore shows. Ozzy came to our gig at the Hammersmith Odeon earlier in the year because he was firing Jake and was good friends with Gary. Ozzy always wanted Gary to play in his band. Four months later, Jake and I were getting together to form Badlands. That record came out in 1989, and I got fired from Badlands.

I immediately called everyone I knew in the business to tell them I was looking for a gig, I called up Doug Goldstein who used to work for Black Sabbath as a security guard and later became Guns 'N Roses' manager. Doug was out with Great White and Alice Cooper and he told me that Alice needed a drummer. A week after I got fired from Badlands I auditioned for Alice, got

the gig in January of 1990 and suddenly I'm on tour with Alice.

I have to say, as a kid I loved all those musicians that I was working with, it was a surreal journey for me. I remember doing the Black Sabbath album with producer Jeff Glixman. I knew he had produced Gary Moore *Corridors of Power* and *Victims of the Future* and I said to him, "If you ever work with Gary Moore again, I would love to have the chance to play with him." Two years later I was in Gary's band.

While I was recording with Badlands in New York City in the beginning of '89 someone told me that Paul Stanley needed a drummer for a solo tour and that Paul wanted to meet me. The KISS office was around the corner from my hotel. I walked over, gave him some CD's that I played on, told him what I had done, and left. That night Jason Flom from Atlantic Records came to the Record Plant and said, "I just saw Paul Stanley at the China Club, he told me you're playing drums on his solo tour, congratulations!" As soon as I got home, I got a message saying Paul wants to start rehearsals, so I flew back to New York and crammed about 25 tunes right off the bat.

MD: That's a lot to learn, how do you learn tunes?

ES: I'm not a chart guy, I've tried doing that, but it goes back to what we spoke about before. I want to be able to play songs instinctually, reading a chart (no offense to anybody) isn't me. Some guys can read anything, and they're really good readers, I was a good sight reader when I was a kid. But to me, the right way to play songs is by *knowing* the material, not by *reading* the material. That way you can really make it *feel* good, you can focus more on tempo and feel, as opposed to trying to remember where you are in the song.

Later that year, when I was living in LA, Paul asked if I could play on some KISS demos. Eric Carr lived in New York, but

everyone else

(Bruce Kulick, Gene, and Paul) all lived in LA.

So, I played on a bunch of KISS demos, but I went back on tour with Alice Cooper after that. That's when I referred Kevin Valentine which got him in the mix with the KISS family in early 1991. I was working with Alice, and we were home on a break when Paul called and asked me to do the tune for the soundtrack to *Bill and Ted's Bogus Adventure*. I cut that with Bob Ezrin producing. I think they wanted to test the waters with Bob. I went back on tour with Alice and got a message from Paul saying that they needed some help in the studio to record because Eric Carr was ill. I agreed to do some of the record because I was only home for two weeks, and then have Kevin Valentine do the other half. I started to work on some of the material from the work tapes and that night I was in a rehearsal room with Bruce Kulick teaching me the reps. We started rehearsing, did some pre-production, and started cutting tracks. In the meantime, they tried some other drummers who didn't work out. One of them was Aynsley Dunbar because Paul loved that big Whitesnake record from 1987.

MD: He's killer on that record, everyone assumes it's Tommy Aldridge because he did the videos.

ES: Aynsley is a one of my heroes! He's a phenomenal drummer but he wasn't right for what KISS was doing. They even had Eric Carr come back and play twice, but he had just had heart surgery and just wasn't up to the task. That's when they called me because I had done that tune for the soundtrack. I talked with Shep Gordon (Alice's manager) and I cut the drum tracks for



the KISS record *Revenge*, and went back out with Alice for two weeks while the band overdubbed their parts. I came back and did the same thing on another batch of tunes. The last tune I cut wasn't working, so they brought Kevin Valentine in to do that track. After we did that record it still wasn't a given that I was joining the band. After Eric Carr died tragically, they considered other drummers before they decided on me to be the drummer in KISS. I prepared the way I always did, and in 1991 I joined the band. We did MTV *Unplugged* in the summer of '95 and then went into the studio to record *The Carnival of Souls*, that album got shelved because they decided to do the *Reunion Tour* from 1996 to 2001.

This is when grunge came around, and Alice didn't work for five years. I was a little concerned during those years because there wasn't any work for what I was doing. I thought that I might have to re-invent myself or find something else to do. I wound up subbing for Jimmy DeGrasso in Alice's band when Jimmy joined Megadeth. Fortunately, a friend told me that Brian May was looking for a drummer to replace Cozy Powell because he had recently passed away, so I called his management only to find out that Tony Iommi had already recommended me. Brian had (of course) played with Roger Taylor and Cozy Powell his whole life, and Steve Ferrone had done a short promotional tour, but Brian was looking for something else. Brian is a hard rock guitar player at heart, and when I auditioned it went over like gangbusters. Queen is probably my favorite band ever, so that was a dream come true. I kept subbing in Alice Cooper's band, and I even did some gigs with Queen as their second drummer when Roger would go out front and sing. Then Queen got Paul Rodgers, and they elected not to use a second drummer. Rufus Taylor later became their second drummer, but he joined The Darkness, and now they have Tyler Warren, and he's simply amazing.

Brian and Roger are the coolest guys ever! It was very hard not to be a "fanboy," but inside I was freaking out! Actually, when I first joined Brian's band, a mutual friend was talking to him, and Brian said that he thought that I didn't care that I got the gig. It turns out I was being too "cool," and "professional," in hiding my excitement. Brian thought that it seemed like I didn't care if I got the gig. You have to remember, however humble somebody is, everyone still has an ego, and no one wants to be around someone that is indifferent and doesn't care. People want to see genuine enthusiasm for their gig.

MD: That's another great point about professionalism, sometimes it's a fine line to walk.

ES: That was a great self-teaching moment for me. Sure, you have to act like you've been there, and be humble. People say, "fake it until you make it," but you can't really fake it. Being humble, being qualified, and "getting it" is important. "Getting it" means knowing what it takes to get there and stay there.

MD: All that professionalism answers the question about getting into, and staying in KISS for 26 years.

ES: I came back to KISS in 2001 and recorded *Sonic Boom*, a few live records, and *Monster*. If you want to

be gainfully employed and have longevity in the music business, you realize that there are certain factors you can't control. Health issues, age considerations, or if people decide to just stop. But the important thing is that you must be honest with yourself about what you do and what you don't do. I realized a long time ago I'm a drummer, not a songwriter, and not a front man. I'm not that guy, I don't have that personality. I'm a good band member and a team player. That is a skill set you have to develop as well as being able to play well.

I know so many guys that are great musicians in many ways,

I like hard rock drummers that have an English feel and style. I always thought Carmine and Denny had that English feel.

but they can't get out of their own way. It's a shame, a lot of them are people whose talent I really respect. I see someone who is so talented and wonder why doesn't this guy do something? Why isn't he doing more? I get frustrated for them because I see someone who is more talented than everybody I know, and five times more talented than I could ever be. It's frustrating to watch, but some people can't get out of their own way. It's not just about your ability on your instrument, or your talent for writing songs. You must know how to channel that into a productive way of working and getting along with others. It's called the music *business*, not music *friends*. If you don't like that it's a business, then don't join a band, and don't try to make a living playing music. You can't just do whatever the hell you want and just play music for yourself in the music business, I know guys that think that way, and it doesn't work!

Life is very simple to me, it's about quality of life. You can have a great quality of life if you do something that you enjoy doing as a job. Hopefully you'll be generous and help pay for the less fortunate. It's good to help others, but you must be able to survive, and unfortunately that costs money. Therefore, if you make more money, you can have a better quality of life, and help more people. It's not about being rich and famous, it's just about your quality of life. I look at life from the basic essence of what life is. I worked in factories, I had regular jobs, I worked at a Ford dealership as a parts counter guy for a couple years. I did all that and I realized I didn't want to do that. There is nothing wrong with it, but I had aspirations and dreams. I wanted to be a musician. I knew that from the time I picked up the sticks as a kid, I wanted to be a drummer and play in a band. I wanted to be in the biggest band because I had the posters on the wall, and I looked at them every day. I didn't want *fame*; I had a passion for

music. I always felt that somehow, deep down inside, I was supposed to do this. But I knew that I was going to have to figure it out. You don't know how to get there, you just have the feeling that you could be one of

I really think Lenny is the perfect blend of everything that I like in jazz and rock fusion drumming...

the guys that are doing it, you just have to figure out how to get there. That was the challenge, figuring it out.

In life, things happen, families, divorces, death... You have successes, you have heart breaks, and you have losses. You learn to navigate the emotional landscape that life is going to bring you along the journey. That stuff doesn't stop when you're successful, it's not a matter of *if* you're going to experience those things, it's a matter of *when*. Everybody's gonna experience life, not in the same way necessarily, but everyone is going to experience these things, so learn how to be strong and step up to the challenges as they happen. You gotta be tough to survive in the music business, it's not for everybody. I wonder if a lot of younger people have that toughness. I know the journey that I went on, I know how the business was, and what it's become. The same business model isn't there right now, you don't have that scene.

When I moved to LA in late '83 it was the prime hotbed of rock music. The scene was blowing up, that was the place to be in the music world, every weekend on the Sunset Strip was like Mardi Gras. I don't know what's up for the future of a lot of younger musicians aspiring to do the same thing that I did. It was a unique culture and a vibe that was going on, I'm glad I got to experience it, but it's not gonna be like that again. Every era has its own time and place where things happen. Whether it was San Francisco in the 60s, New York in the 70s, or London. England always produces amazing music, almost all my favorite bands came from England. It's hard to believe that such a small country has produced such an influential amount of music and musicians, that's just unprecedented. But the first thing any young musician must do is get into the cultural mix of a music scene and catch the musical wave when it happens. I have always felt that I was able to do that in Ohio and then in LA I navigated that wave until today.

I don't even know what I'm going to do next, I'm not even thinking about it. I'm going to do what I've always done, stay in the moment, be prepared for opportunities when (and if) they present themselves, and take things one day at a time. As John Lennon said, "Life is what happens while you are making plans." I'm going to keep navigating, and keep swimming, because if you stop swimming you'll drown. Like we said at the beginning, it's about longevity. But I'll add this. Longevity happens on every level. Everyone is not going to be lucky enough to play in a band that plays in arenas in front of thousands of people and flies around on a private jet. I'm not sure what I'm going to do or what I want to do next. But I know

one thing, going forward I only want to play with people that I like, or play the music I like, period. I'm not gonna do a gig just for the money because I don't need the money. I'm not independently wealthy, but I set myself up where I'm OK. I live very reasonably and humbly, and I'm not extravagant.

20 years ago, I met and played with Ronnie Montrose for a while. I did that because I liked him, I got along great



with him, and I loved his music. That first Montrose album with Denny Carmassi was a big influence on me as a drummer. I loved and admired Ronnie Montrose, that gig didn't pay any money, it was purely about playing the music and the experience of playing with Ronnie. I have no problem playing clubs if it's the music and somebody I want to play with.

MD: Talk about the importance of living within your means as a musician.

ES: I've seen people make mistakes, I'm not gonna name names,

but I remember in the '80s certain bands and guys became big. Suddenly, they're buying big homes and flashy cars, fast forward to a few years later, and they lost it all. Trust your own sense of responsibility. Don't rely on accountants, managers, and other people to do that because they'll make bad choices and then they'll say, "Oh well..." In those situations, there's no recourse, the money is gone, you're not gonna get blood from a stone. I've been exposed to some dodgy managers along the way, some of the guys that were notorious and have made music history with their bands. Thankfully, I wasn't managed by them personally, and they didn't have anything to do with my personal finances. But I was in those bands as an employee, and I remember thinking (and mind you I was very inexperienced,) I just can't understand the choices they're making; it was so obvious to me that these were bad decisions. I had a very hard time understanding why people made these bad choices, but then I started realizing that drugs will make people do bad things and make very bad decisions.

Here's the rule, if you make \$10, don't spend \$12. With every \$10 you make, pay your bills, put some away, and if you have some extra money left over, now you have some savings. Support and sustain your standard of living but keep your standard of living reasonable so you can afford your life. Do your best to avoid debt or incur as little debt as possible. That's going to be the savior. I'm not gonna preach to somebody and tell them how to run their life, but I have zero debt. I pay my credit card in full every month, I have no car payments, no house payments, nothing. I pay my bills like everybody else: healthcare, property tax, utilities, food, that's it. My monthly nut is the stuff that happens every day. I've seen a lot of musicians that make \$10 and spend \$11 and they never have anything saved. Then, if things dry up, or (God forbid) you have a health issue, or something like COVID happens and you can't work, you'll get through it.

MD: Here's the big question, is KISS *done*?

ES: Well, I don't think they're done. I think it's gonna morph into some other kind of business model. That is an unwritten script at this point. I know I'm still involved; I think I'll still be involved in certain aspects for a while. They decide what direction they're going to move. I'm part of a team, even though Gene and Paul are the leaders of that team and the owners of the company, they know that the band with Tommy and I have had a lot of success together. This KISS lineup has been together for 20 years, I would like to think that they look at us as good team members and good assets to the company. It is a business, it's a company, it's a band, it's a brand.

MD: We should all be fortunate enough to be "a brand."

ES: Every band is a brand, it's a brand of music. Sure, they choose to get involved in other things outside of just music with marketing and stuff like that. A lot of bands probably wish they could have all the merchandising and stuff that KISS has. I think they've done fantastic for themselves, there's a lot of things they've done that have become commonplace in the music industry. They were the first to put their name on their guitar picks. They weren't the first artists to do meet and greets, I was told it was the band Alabama, but somebody that worked for KISS told them to think about doing what Alabama was doing, nobody even knew about it. They expanded that into these fan experiences like coming to sound check, playing unplugged,

and doing special things for which you could charge a premium. That happened because bands weren't selling records anymore, and if you're not selling records, you're not getting publishing. Fans don't understand that the way you used to make a living

as a musician is writing songs and putting out records. Then you toured to support that record. Now you do a new record to have a reason to tour, the model has completely flipped. The only way to make money now is by touring and selling merchandise. And part of the merchandising is the meet and greets.

When I went to a concert as a kid, I never went with an expectation of meeting the band. I just wanted a good show, I never went to hotels and tried to meet bands. I didn't want to *meet* them I wanted to *be* them. Maybe that's just my mindset, but I have no problem with it. It's all about participation, if you don't like something don't participate. If I'm watching TV and I don't like a channel, I change the channel. I don't sit there and keep watching and complain that I wish they would do this or that and go on chat forums and complain about why the show (that I supposedly like) is not doing what I want. Bands, like people, don't stay frozen in time in perpetuity, what do you want, *Groundhog Day*? Cast your vote for something through participation. If you like something, support it! Whether it's local bands, jazz music, classical music, or whatever. I think jazz music is the highest and purest musical artform, and those musicians get paid less than anybody.

MD: Like Art Blakey said, "We need to keep appearing, so we don't start disappearing."

ES: That's a great statement.

MD: After being in KISS for 26 years, what have you learned?

ES: Gene and Paul are good teachers, there's no perfect scenarios, everyone you work with and even within your own family, you might like 90% of someone, but you must accept that there is 10% that you might not agree with. I have a long



Felipe Laverde

enough experience to look back on my life with Gene and Paul to know they are survivors, and I'm a survivor too. I've survived this business, when you learn to be a survivor, sometimes you make very difficult choices that might impact other people. Sometimes that's what you do to survive a particular scenario or situation at as it's happening. I have learned to have a better respect or understanding of that, I may not like it, and I might not handle it the same way, but you can do that when it's *your* band and *your* business. If somebody else does things differently, as an employee you have to go along with it. I don't have to agree with it, but I have to respect it. They're allowed to do things their way and make their own decisions. Those guys came from nothing and turned into something big. But they had stuff happen to them where money was stolen, and bad business decisions were made. They got burned, when that stuff happens you put on armor and become more protective and less trusting. Being that way will force you to make very shrewd decisions, but I respectfully understand that being shrewd is a survival tactic.

I don't believe in screwing people over in any way, but I understand that sometimes you have to make tough choices. A good example is when Gene and Paul did the *Reunion Tour*. They have a certain standard of living and lifestyle, and they didn't want to lose that. They knew that if they did that tour, they could continue their standard of living and lifestyle, and

that's what they did. I think most people would have done the same thing, I don't blame them one bit, they did the right thing for themselves.

My grandparents and my family always taught me to be smart, save your money, and live within your means. I'll give credit to my upbringing, but I'm just wired that way. Some people are wired to be

more responsible, maybe I'm too responsible. I don't take a lot of chances in certain areas of life. My mother used to tell me to take chances in life, because success is what happens to people that take chances. That's why I took the chance and moved to LA. When I moved to LA I didn't know any musicians or people, and I didn't know anything about the LA music scene, but I figured it out. I tell people to be a quick study, be a chameleon so you can adapt to different environments, have your eyes and ears open, always be open

minded, pay attention to what's going on, and don't get too high or too low. Then you can figure it out, assimilate, and act like you've been there.

For Eric's tour kit rundown go to moderndrummer.com/eric

Check out Eric's drummer profile page, at moderndrummer.com

